

Iowa Outdoors

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

www.iowadnr.com

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SPRING TROUT FISHING OUTLOOK IS EXCELLENT

DES MOINES – The excitement of spring trout fishing in beautiful northeast Iowa is on the minds of many anglers across the state. The much-anticipated trout stocking season is set to begin on April 1. For those anglers or families who have never experienced the beauty of a spring day on an Iowa trout stream, it is a memory not soon forgotten.

To enhance the fishing opportunities, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) trout hatcheries at Manchester, Decorah and Elkader annually release catchable-size trout into 44 northeast Iowa trout streams. This stocking program continues throughout the summer and into late fall to provide an abundance of trout fishing opportunities.

Gary Siegwarth, trout hatchery manager at Big Spring, said more than 300,000 catchable-size rainbow, brook and brown trout will be stocked in the nine-county “trout country” area in northeast Iowa in 2004. Hatchery staff will make nearly 1,300 individual stream stocking trips to distribute these trout throughout the many miles of streams available to anglers. This ensures there are always trout present for anglers to catch and enjoy.

Fingerling stockings and natural reproduction add to trout fishing opportunities

In addition to stocked catchable-size fish, stream populations of trout available to anglers may also come from annual stockings of fingerling-size (2-4 inches) trout or from natural reproduction within the stream itself. Siegwarth said 240,000 fingerlings have

been stocked annually in recent years. These fingerlings have made a significant contribution to the trout populations in 16 of the catchable and special regulation streams.

“We’ve also seen a major increase in the number of streams with trout produced by natural reproduction. Ten streams have brown or brook trout populations that are now totally self-sustaining. And eight additional streams have at least some natural reproduction that is adding to these streams brown trout populations. This is a very positive trend that is contributing significantly to increased angling success,” Siegwarth said.

“Another trend we’ve seen in the trout program is a major increase in the number of trout anglers who are catching and releasing trout,” Siegwarth said.

Extensive telephone surveys conducted in 1996 and 2001 indicate that trout anglers who release ‘most’ or ‘all’ of the trout they catch increased from just 28 percent in 1996 to 47 percent in 2001.

“This major change in just a five-year period has resulted in a higher level of angler success. In fact, the 2001 survey showed that over 90 percent of all trout anglers were successful in catching trout,” he said. “This is proof positive that trout are not difficult to catch.”

In an effort to reduce program costs, however, anglers will see a reduction in the number of stocking trips on 15 of the catchable streams. Also, because of the significant increase in trout populations in many streams due to fingerling stockings and natural reproduction, the total number of catchable-size trout stocked will also be reduced, further reducing total program costs.

Additional trout streams to fish

In addition to the 44 areas stocked with catchable-size trout, Iowa has seven streams with special regulations. These regulations are designed to either protect or enhance wild or fingerling-stocked trout populations. Posted areas on each of these seven streams restrict anglers to artificial lures only. Depending on the stream or stream section, regulations require anglers to either release unharmed all trout of certain species or of certain lengths. Trout populations in these streams add diversity to the program and provide a greater challenge for anglers. Specific special regulations are in effect on the posted portions of Ensign Hollow and Bloody Run in Clayton County; Spring Branch in Delaware County; French Creek and Waterloo Creek in Allamakee County; South Pine Creek in Winneshiek County; and McLoud Run in Linn County.

Trout fee changes

Trout anglers are also reminded of a change in the trout fee requirement. In the past, anglers were required to have purchased the trout fee only if they possessed trout. Anglers are now required to purchase the trout fee to either “fish for” or possess trout.

This means that even anglers making use of the trout program strictly through catch-and-release angling will need to purchase the trout fee which helps support the program. The annual trout fee is \$11 for Iowa residents and \$13.50 for non-residents. Both residents and non-residents under 16 years of age can still fish for or possess trout for free if they fish with a licensed adult who has paid the trout fee. However, the combined catch of the children and licensed adult cannot exceed the daily limit of five trout. Siegwarth said that many kids simply buy their own trout fee privilege so they can fish independently and possess their own daily limit. Persons with a lifetime fishing license must also purchase the trout fee to fish for trout. No trout fee is required for Iowa residents on Free Fishing Days, which will take place June 4, 5 and 6, 2004. Free Fishing Days is a great opportunity for anglers who have never tried trout fishing to discover the spectacular resources of northeast Iowa and to get “hooked” on the fun of trout fishing for life!

How to obtain additional information

Monthly stocking schedules for the announced catchable trout streams are available on the DNR website at www.iowadnr.com or by contacting any of the three trout hatcheries (Manchester – 563-927-3276, Big Spring – 563-245-2446, Decorah – 563-382-8324). Weekly stocking updates for all three hatcheries are also available 24-hours a day on a single recorded message at 563-927-5736. This also is a change from past years when you had to call the hatchery that stocked the particular streams in which you were interested. Now there is only one trout recording number to remember. Twenty catchable streams will be stocked on an unannounced basis in 2004. This reduces the fishing pressure on the day of stocking and spreads out the stocked trout among more anglers.

The free ***Iowa Trout Fishing Guide*** includes a detailed map of the stream locations plus much other trout fishing information and is available at any of the DNR trout hatcheries, many license vendors or through the mail. This handy guide is a valuable resource for both beginning and veteran anglers and will help you discover your favorite trout streams in northeast Iowa.

Be a considerate and ethical angler -

The DNR urges anglers to always be considerate of landowners because many trout streams are on private property. Anglers should always take all their litter with them, not block driveways and just use common-sense courtesy. Although arrangements have been made by the DNR with landowners to allow public fishing on stocked portions of the catchable streams and certain sections of the special regulation streams, always ask or check before entering if you are unsure of where public fishing is allowed.

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CUT A TREE, SAVE A PRAIRIE: PRAIRIE RESCUE 2004

Volunteers are invited to cut a tree as a part of the 5th annual statewide Prairie Rescue event. Participants will help remove small trees and other woody species that threaten native prairies and/or will plant native wildflowers and grasses. There are 25 Prairie Rescue sites included in this year's event. Activities will take place on weekends through the month of April and into early May.

In a world quickly losing its biological diversity, the prairie claims the unenviable title of most endangered ecosystem on the planet. Prairie once occupied more than 70 percent of Iowa's landscape, but only 0.1 percent of Iowa's defining ecosystem remains intact today.

"We live in the most biologically-altered state in the nation," said Mark Edwards, trails coordinator for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. Indeed, of the 27 million acres of Iowa prairie that spanned from the Mississippi River to the Missouri River at the time of the Lewis and Clark expedition, only 30,000 acres remain today.

These prairie remnants are scattered throughout the state in small patches, many of which are surrounded by encroaching invasive plants. The pre-settlement prairie ecosystem was renewed by natural grazing and the periodic fires that swept over the landscape. These fires have been suppressed over the past 150 years. Without proper management, which includes prescribed burns and removal of invasive non-prairie species, Iowa's remaining prairie remnants could be lost forever.

Saving the final vestiges of prairie in the state of Iowa is no small task. It entails a concerted effort that demands thoughtful planning and generous offerings of time and energy by volunteers. "We all must act as stewards of the land," Edwards said.

Please join us and get your hands dirty for a good cause. Volunteers should wear work clothes, gloves, and bring pruning tools if possible. Individuals, families and organizations are all invited to participate. No experience is necessary – simply bring a positive attitude, an open mind for learning, and a willingness to have some fun.

Several private and public conservation groups including the Loess Hills Preservation Society, Iowa Prairie Network, Loess Hills Audubon Society, Keepers of the Land AmeriCorps and the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation are sponsoring this year's statewide Iowa Prairie Rescue event.

For more information about Prairie Rescue and the 25 sites around the state, visit the web at: www.inhf.org/rescue2004.htm. Additional questions can be directed to Alicia Hraha (Alicia.Hraha@dnr.state.ia.us) or Pete Lovell (Peter.Lovell@dnr.state.ia.us) at (515) 281-3134.

For more information, contact, Michael Pecenka, DNR at (515) 281-6271 or Alicia Hraha, AmeriCorps, at (515) 281-3134

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PLANT NATIVE TREES AND SHRUB FOR BEST RESULTS

The decision has been made to plant trees and shrubs this spring. The next big decision is what type of tree and or shrub to plant. While planting exotic (non-native) species may have an exciting appeal, using native trees and shrub seedlings from an Iowa grown nursery is best for all concerned.

“Native trees and shrubs are better adapted to Iowa’s extremes in weather and to our planting sites providing superior native wildlife habitat. They have adapted themselves over time with insect and disease issues, and they are less likely to be stressed than non-native plants during extreme droughts. Native trees are also a link to Iowa’s heritage,” said John Walkowiak, chief of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources forestry bureau.

Prior to settlement, Iowa contained 6.7 million acres of forest with a vast mixture of native oaks, hickories, maples and others. Today, with 2.7 million acres of forestland, Iowans can still take pride in growing some of the world’s finest hardwoods such as the black walnut, oak, ash, cottonwood, sycamore and silver maple.

“Whether you are planting trees to grow forest products, to increase or improve wildlife habitat, protect the site from soil and water erosion or to improve your landscape scenery, you will receive benefits from the multiple goals as a bonus when planting native trees and shrubs. While native seedling plantings offer the best chance for success, you should pick and choose species according to your land management objectives and your planting site,” Walkowiak said.

The State Forest Nursery in Ames offers hardy, native trees and shrubs to landowners at affordable costs. The State Nursery buys its native seeds from local Iowa seed collectors each year to ensure their planting stock will withstand Iowa’s land and weather conditions. By providing a reliable source of suitable planting stock in large quantities, the State Forest Nursery produces between five million bareroot seedlings per year for sale to private landowners for reforestation, soil erosion control and wildlife habitat.

“Before ordering seedlings or gathering seed, take some time to decide what you want from your trees, Walkowiak said. Good sources of additional information are district foresters, County Conservation Boards or county extension agents. The State Forest Nursery has a good supply of native shrubs and small trees perfect for wildlife habitat projects – whether it is for the backyard, a small acreage or large planting. Call 800-865-2477 or visit www.iowatreeplanting.com for more information.

For more information contact Walkowiak at 515-242-5966 or john.walkowiak@dnr.state.ia.us

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[Hold this column until March 25]

ANTLER HUNTING

By Joe Wilkinson

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

Moving slowly, steadily, A. Jay Winter shifted his gaze. For a few steps, he focused on the ground at his feet; separating the yellow-brown grasses from the dropped twigs, from the soil and bark. Then, it was a sweep of the fence line or hillside ahead; looking for that just-out-of-place clue that would lead him...to an *antler*.

Not a deer. Just the antler. The hunting seasons are two and three months behind us. Now, as the snow and ice recede, the ground is a drab brown along the twisting network of creek beds and thickets. Fence line grasses are matted flat. New vegetation will soon grow over it all. For a few weeks, though, the tip of a little 'basket rack' antler is distinct against the dead grass. The thick base of an impressive four or five pointer shows up in the muddy trail across a steep creek crossing. If you know where to look.

"Most (winter) nights on my way home, I see 50 to 250 deer in this general area," relays Winter, as we work our way into a wooded area in Guthrie County. "In the winter, deer conserve energy. They bed in certain locations. They feed in certain areas. They travel in a straight line; in a small, tight area." Our strategy, then, was simple. Walk where the deer walk.

Bucks use antlers for sparring; for dominance during the late fall/early winter breeding period. As mid-winter arrives, they are no longer of use, and are shed. Until the mineral-rich antlers are consumed by rodents, they lie where they fall; potential trophies for dedicated hunters or just lucky hikers in the soggy period between snow and grass.

Winter likes to concentrate on crossings--over a fence, a creek or ditch—anywhere that the jarring of a deer's legs hitting ground could topple an antler loose from its pedicle. "I'll locate deer feeding in a field during the winter—in January when bucks still have their antlers," he explains. "Then I go out later in the season and look in the same general location."

To the north and east of us, picked grain fields attract winter-feeding whitetails. We moved from the fence lines and creeks to a brushy hillside. Plenty of sign showed this east facing hillside as a high traffic bedding area. Its low hanging branches could dislodge those late winter racks, too.

But finding a shed antler was only part of the show. Waving me up from the creek bed, Winter pointed to a spot 20 yards ahead. Stepping forward, we flushed a woodcock, which whistled away a few dozen yards. Rare to see, the post-snow melt

hillside would yield the grubs and worms on which it feeds, as it moves through. Early season bluebirds darted away, as we worked the edges. Nearby, crows harassed an owl out of their territory. Circling back, we heard and then saw the deer we knew were holding tight. About 20 finally trotted over the hill, away from us. “Hunting shed antlers is just like any other hunting,” explains Winter. “It’s not just going out and ‘getting game’. It is enjoying yourself in the outdoors. It’s the best exercise you can get.”

And just like hunting, we came back empty *this* day. No new antlers to add to the dozens Winter has found over the years—or the grand total of two in my meager collection. We have teamed up before and found three; including a matched pair from what had no doubt been a trophy buck a few weeks before.

Winter’s antler hunts have dipped since kids came along. His boys are old enough now for short trips; more walks in the woods than antler hunting excursions. But that will change. In the meantime, so have the antlers. “Deer hunting strategy was different 15 years ago,” observes Winter. “Any deer with antlers was fair game. People were shooting 1 1/2 year old bucks. That meant fewer antlers in the woods. Now, the emphasis on deer management means more does are taken. More bucks are left to grow into *bigger* bucks. Now, I find more big sheds in the woods. I can trace (that trend) over the years.”

After-season scouting trips, spring turkey hunting, even late winter firewood forays. Any of them could turn up an antler. Like deer hunting, there’s a demand for the biggest and the most impressive. More than that, it is a test of your skills and observation.

Mostly, though, it is a chance to get out in the woods again.

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